United Nations S/PV.8345

Security Council

Seventy-third year

Provisional

8345th meeting

Friday, 7 September 2018, 9.30 a.m.
New York

President:	Mrs. Haley	(United States of America)
Members:	Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Mr. Llorentty Soliz
	China	Mr. Ma Zhaoxu
	Côte d'Ivoire	Mr. Ipo
	Equatorial Guinea	Mr. Ndong Mba
	Ethiopia	Ms. Guadey
	France	Mr. Delattre
	Kazakhstan	Mr. Umarov
	Kuwait	Mr. Al Jarallah
	Netherlands	Mr. Van Oosterom
	Peru	Mr. Meza-Cuadra
	Poland	Ms. Wronecka
	Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
	Sweden	Mr. Skoog
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Ms. Pierce

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

This record contains the text of speeches delivered in English and of the translation of speeches delivered in other languages. The final text will be printed in the *Official Records of the Security Council*. Corrections should be submitted to the original languages only. They should be incorporated in a copy of the record and sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned to the Chief of the Verbatim Reporting Service, room U-0506 (verbatimrecords@un.org). Corrected records will be reissued electronically on the Official Document System of the United Nations (http://documents.un.org).

18-27866 (E)

Accessible document Please recycle

The meeting was called to order at 9.35 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

The President: In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to participate in this meeting.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Mr. Staffan de Mistura, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, and Mr. John Ging, Director of Operations and Advocacy in the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

Mr. De Mistura is joining today's meeting via video-teleconference from Geneva.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I welcome Mr. De Mistura to the meeting and now give him the floor.

Mr. De Mistura: I thank you, Madam President, for this opportunity to address the Security Council. We believe that the timing is very appropriate, in particular because the focus is on Idlib. We have been hearing about it over the past few days. We are all terribly concerned because all of the elements exist for a perfect storm, with potentially devastating humanitarian and other consequences. First of all, let me provide a summary of the facts. I am sure that John Ging will be able to refer to some of the humanitarian aspects.

The best available and independent assessment of the United Nations estimates that there are at least 2.9 million people in Idlib. I repeat 2.9 million people — almost 3 million, in fact. Among them are 1 million children, and 1.4 million people who have already been displaced at least once. Terrorist groups on the Security Council's list are also present, including non-Syrians, foreign fighters and those who have committed terrible acts in many other places. There are also armed opposition groups, many of whom have been evacuated to Idlib through reconciliation agreements and are not members of terrorist groups. An overwhelming number of people in Idlib — 98.5 per cent — are civilians.

President Al-Assad has stated that restoring sovereignty and defeating terrorists remain the priority of the Syrian Government. Senior Government officials have also stated that retaking Idlib is the next goal. Senior Iranian and Russian officials have spoken in strong terms about their own determination to purge terrorists from Idlib. At the same time, they have indicated that, first, the Government would prefer so-called reconciliation agreements rather than military action; secondly, Russian-Turkish understanding is crucial; and, thirdly, Syria does not want a confrontation with Turkey. Those are recent statements made by Syrian Government officials.

Russia has been engaged in intense dialogue with Turkey in particular and, as the Council knows, all eyes are on what could transpire, or has transpired, following the summit meeting of the Presidents of Iran, Russia and Turkey, which just concluded in Tehran. Meanwhile, reports suggest increased deployments of Government and affiliated forces and equipment near the Idlib de-escalation zone — yes, that used to be, and still is officially, a de-escalation zone. Air strikes and mutual artillery shelling have been reported on its perimeter for the past months, resulting in deaths and injuries on both sides, with an intensification since 4 September.

Meanwhile, the leader of what they call the Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham — basically the Al-Nusra Front, and let us call them by name — has publicly signalled the group's intention to fight. On 2 September, photos of weaponized drones were circulated online after landing in the Al-Ghab plain. Ostensibly, the same models of Russian Federation planes were used to carry out several attacks on the Khmeimim air base in recent months.

For their part, armed opposition groups in Idlib have reportedly been fortifying their own positions, digging tunnels and trenches and detonating bridges. Many of those armed opposition groups — that are not terrorist groups — have pleaded publicly for the Astana guarantors to secure a non-military solution. Since early August, almost every single armed opposition group in Idlib has now come under the banner of what is called the "national liberation front". That includes various groups that have been operating under the same banner as the Al-Nusra Front in the past. If that is confirmed, which is what we seem to be hearing,

that can be taken as a sign of their own willingness to separate from Al-Nusra. We hope that they will now take even further steps to separate themselves from listed terrorist groups. I note in that context that, at the end of August, Turkey made it clear that it views Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham — the Al-Nusra Front — as a terrorist organization, thereby sending a strong signal to armed groups to separate from Al-Nusra from now on. With statements and counter-statements regarding potential chemical-weapons use, we have warnings and counter-warnings about the dangers of a major assault on Idlib, and we have seen an intensified military presence in the region.

I have laid out to the members of the Security Council all of the ingredients for a perfect storm. The dangers are profound, in that any battle for Idlib would be a horrific and bloody battle. Civilians are its potential victims, and there are ever-present dangers in the case of a full-scale assault of incidents or rapid escalations involving regional and international players. Let us remember that there is no Idlib after Idlib to which people can be evacuated, or at least feel safer in during a battle. There must another way than an all-out military escalation. The Security Council cannot accept that the civilians of Idlib must meet that type of fate.

Efforts to combat terrorism do not supersede obligations under international law and the moral conscience of humankind. We must put the sanctity of civilian human life above everything else. That is why we are urging ourselves and all stakeholders to contribute to finding a formula to prevent a terrible tragedy, while at the same allowing the issue of Security Council-designated terrorist groups to be addressed.

The declaration issued by Presidents Putin, Erdoğan and Rouhani states that they have decided to address the situation in Idlib "in the spirit of cooperation that characterized the Astana format". We do not have many more details on that. We would like to see what that means in practice in order to address the issue. They are the guarantors of the last de-escalation area, and therefore have direct influence — and, frankly, responsibility — on how to solve it. I am sure Idlib is at the top of their agenda, as was shown in the Tehran meeting.

I look also to other key actors, including Gulf and many other countries, that have leverage over non-terrorist armed opposition groups to do whatever they can to ensure that they put civilians first and separate from Al-Nusra. I am concerned about reports that many groups — although not all — have become increasingly desperate, and in some cases ruthless.

My colleague John Ging, from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, will brief members of the Council on what must happen on the humanitarian side to protect civilians and on the humanitarian response plan. But let me emphasize that people should be granted safe passage to places of their own choosing, if they want to leave temporarily. We must allow the opening of a sufficient number of protected voluntary evacuation routes for civilians in any direction — east, north and south. For that, the United Nations must be granted access to scale. The United Nations stands ready, including myself and surely all of my colleagues of the humanitarian team, to work with all parties on the spot and elsewhere on the modalities and parameters for establishing a functioning evacuation route, if it were required, with full respect for international humanitarian law and human rights principles.

Let me further reiterate the Secretary-General's clear position that any use of chemical weapons is totally and completely unacceptable. As the Organization on the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) has found, the norm against the use of chemicals weapons has been repeatedly violated in Syria. That must not happen again. I cannot stress enough the danger associated with any alleged use of those weapons, not only in humanitarian terms but also when it comes to the acute threat to maintaining international peace and security. I equally strongly underscore that the overwhelming majority of civilians killed in Syria have been victims of indiscriminate, or sometimes targeted, attacks against them using conventional weapons. Such attacks re also abhorrent and unacceptable.

All the talk of an assault that could produce a perfect storm in Idlib is happening at exactly the same time as serious talk about moving forward on a constitutional committee and about desires to urge Syrian refugees to return to their country. Those narratives do not square well with *each other. Either we are trying to find a* political way to end the war and move to a post-war political scenario, or we will see the war reach new levels of horror. That is why today's meeting in Tehran is so important, and why I am convening Iran, Russia and Turkey in Geneva on Monday and Tuesday, and Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom and the United States on Friday. It

will be the ultimate failure of the imagination and an end of diplomacy if with those efforts we simply see an increase in military activity.

Let me conclude with two points.

I have seen many people — civilians — from Idlib today, including women, noble doctors, farmers and people of all kinds, approximating almost 3 million. They have held peaceful demonstrations and lighted candles at night to show that normal people live in each of the houses, not necessarily terrorists. They make up 3 million civilians. I have been inspired by what they have been telling me. They have been asking us — the United Nations, through the Council — to also express our voices. In that context, since we are addressing the question of separating terrorists from others, protecting civilians and giving a voice to civilians, and as I have been asked if we the United Nations have any ideas, I would like to share that we do have some ideas, and I will take the liberty of elaborating on them when we meet in private. Any idea or proposal to avoid this situation from becoming the biggest humanitarian tragedy at the end of the most horrible conflict in recent memory should at least be given a chance.

The President: I thank Mr. De Mistura for his briefing.

During this presidency, we are holding all meetings in the open. We want to hear from Mr. De Mistura what the civilians have to say and what they think. We would appreciate it if he would say that publicly and let us know what he thinks. If he has any additional comments after we are done, we are more than happy to hear those, if he is comfortable with that being public.

I once again give the floor to Mr. De Mistura.

Mr. De Mistura: Based on your authorization and your request, Madam President, I have no problem in doing so. In fact, all of our proposals are, and should be, public. I will gladly present that information. I only ask to truly be given a chance to do so. I would not like to miss the chance to actually make a proposal and then see whether anyone else has other proposals. I will be happy as long as we do not simply stop at saying that this is a horrible thing and that we hope it does not happen.

The President: We thoroughly agree and we appreciate Mr. De Mistura's service.

I now give the floor to Mr. Ging.

Mr. Ging: Last week, during the monthly briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria (see S/PV.8322), I briefed the Security Council recent developments in Idlib, our current response, the planning under way and preparations should the situation escalate further. Today I will provide an additional update on the situation and on the humanitarian response.

As the Special Envoy stated, of the nearly 3 million people living in the Idlib de-escalation zone — which includes parts of Idlib, Aleppo, Latakia, and Hama governorates — 2.1 million are in need of humanitarian assistance, including 1.4 million people who are internally displaced. While our humanitarian response currently focuses on supporting the 2.1 million people in need, we are concerned for the protection and safety of all civilians living in the area should the hostilities intensify.

On 4 September, renewed air and ground-based strikes in western and southern rural Idlib, as well as northern rural Hama, led to civilian casualties and displacement. Heavy bombardment of the Jisr al-Shughour area of western rural Idlib led to some 13 civilian deaths, including at least four children, injuring another 20 civilians. On 6 September, a hospital near Kafr Zita, in northern Hama, was reportedly hit by an air strike, despite the fact that it had been deconflicted. We also continue to receive reports of improvised explosive devices and other attacks killing and maiming civilians in populated areas throughout Idlib, including humanitarian aid workers. At least three doctors were killed in August alone.

As a result of the insecurity, schools in western Idlib around Jisr al-Shughour and surrounding communities have been suspended. Key crossing points between Government- and opposition-controlled areas are also reportedly closed, some by the destruction of bridges by non-State armed opposition groups. In addition to restricting freedom of movement for the population, that has also contributed to rising food prices and shortages.

At the request of humanitarian organizations, the United Nations has provided deconfliction information for 125 humanitarian sites in Idlib to the military actors. That information was submitted to facilitate the parties' identification of humanitarian facilities, warehouses, offices and sites where humanitarian assistance is being provided to people in need. In their military operations, all parties bear the obligation to take constant care to spare civilians and civilian objects,

including humanitarian workers and humanitarian facilities. Any deconflicted sites that are reported to have been targeted must be immediately investigated.

The United Nations and non-governmental organizations continue to implement a major humanitarian operation throughout Idlib, with an average of 2 million people reached every month with cross-border assistance from Turkey.

Beyond the provision of assistance, efforts are ongoing to ensure that people in need can be supported in the event of an increase in hostilities. Our teams in Damascus and Gaziantep have together developed a readiness plan that sets out a coordinated, flexible response for the affected population in the coming period. Plans are in place to support up to 900,000 women, children and men who could be affected by conflict, including for up to 700,000 people who may be displaced within Idlib and beyond due to potential hostilities. We also estimate that up to 100,000 people may cross into Government-controlled areas. In addition, if the conflict spreads to the Tal Rifaat area, we estimate that another 100,000 people may seek to move towards other areas in Aleppo governorate or to north-east Syria.

Humanitarian aid is already being positioned inside Idlib, as well as in surrounding areas in Aleppo, Latakia and Hama. That includes ready-to-eat food rations sufficient for one week to cover as many as 850,000 people — both through cross-border operations via Turkey and from inside Syria. Additionally, non-food items, shelter, water, sanitation, hygiene and medical supplies are also being positioned. The World Health Organization has dispatched more than 25 tons of supplies to Aleppo in the past month alone.

The United Nations has released $20 million from the Tureky humanitarian fund. Approximately $10 million of that allocation is focused on ensuring shelter, and non-food items will be available should an increase in violence force people to be displaced. While some donors, including the United Kingdom and Germany, have recently provided additional resources, for which we are most grateful, the amount received falls woefully short of the $311 million that we estimate is required if there is an increase in violence resulting in mass displacement. Simply put, that is funding that we do not currently have, as multiple crises over the past period, in eastern Ghouta, Afrin, southern Syria and Idlib earlier this year, have strained our already limited pool of resources.

Civilians in the de-escalation zone have borne the impact of fighting throughout the years of the Syria conflict. Vulnerable populations have displaced to the area from eastern Aleppo, eastern Ghouta, northern rural Homs and southern Syria. Communities and humanitarian responders have been stretched to their limits to support those who arrive, often with nothing. The humanitarian impact on civilians of any increase in fighting will therefore be most severe. And the worst-case scenario in Idlib, where millions would flee fighting, will overwhelm all capacity to respond regardless of plans or funding made available. It has the potential to create a humanitarian emergency at a scale not yet seen during the crisis.

In conclusion, let me highlight five key asks to the Council, and through it to all parties to the conflict and those who have influence over them.

First, there must be a cessation of hostilities in the area and, at a minimum, we must ensure that there is no escalation. Secondly, we must ensure the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure, including humanitarian and medical personnel and assets, in compliance with the parties' obligations under international humanitarian law. Thirdly, we must respect and enable freedom of movement for people who wish to move in any direction. Additionally, civilians who choose to stay must be allowed to do so and must remain protected. Fourthly, we must allow and facilitate safe, rapid, unhindered and sustained humanitarian access to the people in need through the most direct routes, including to areas that have changed control. Fifthly, there must be increased funding for priority response and readiness activities, given that the humanitarian response is already overstretched.

The President: I thank Mr. Ging for his briefing and important remarks.

I would like to remind the Council that after Council members speak, if they have any questions or comments for Mr. De Mistura, we are going to bring him back after the Council members have spoken and before the representative of Syria speaks.

Mr. Al Jarallah (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I would like to thank the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, for his valuable briefing and his efforts in the

Syrian political process. I would also like to thank the Director of Operations and Advocacy in the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Mr. John Ging, for his briefing. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the efforts of all humanitarian workers in Syria.

I deliver this statement on behalf of the co-penholders on the humanitarian situation in Syria, namely, the State of Kuwait and the Kingdom of Sweden.

Today's meeting of the Security Council is taking place at a very critical time. Indications and reports of a possible imminent military escalation in Idlib province are increasing. The international community is concerned, and international aid agencies are preparing themselves hastily. The situation in Idlib is different from those of Aleppo, eastern Ghouta and Dara'a. Idlib is home to nearly 3 million people — half of them internally displaced. Were military operations to begin there, it would be disastrous. The humanitarian consequences will be dire for the inhabitants if no arrangements are reached between the parties concerned. Were such an escalation to occur, where would those innocent civilians go to avoid artillery and air bombardments? We now know that there is no safe place in which they could seek refuge.

We urge all the relevant parties to abide by the de-escalation agreement in Idlib, in the hope that we will not again a de-escalation zone turned into an escalation area. We also echo the appeal of Secretary-General António Guterres to the Government of Syria and all the parties concerned to exercise restraint, as well as his call on the Astana guarantors to step up efforts to find a peaceful solution to the situation in Idlib. In that regard, we note today's summit of the Astana guarantors; we expect them to respect their own de-escalation agreement in Idlib and the relevant Security Council resolutions.

We stress the importance of giving diplomatic efforts more time and attention, including redoubling of efforts by all to avoid further bloodshed. The images of death and destruction from Aleppo and eastern Ghouta remain in our memory. The Syrian people have suffered enough over the past eight years, and have been exposed to flagrant violations of humanitarian law and international human rights law while the perpetrators of those crimes have not been held accountable.

Military attacks against Council-designated terrorist groups in no way absolve any party to the conflict from its obligations under international law, including complying with the principles of distinction, proportionality, precaution and protection of civilians and civilian targets. Even wars have rules that must be observed. Let us remember that it is innocent civilians — children, women and the elderly — who make up the vast majority of the population in Idlib, not terrorists.

We commend the efforts undertaken by OCHA and its partners to stockpile humanitarian supplies in preparation for the expected disaster in Idlib. We urge donors to step up their contributions to the humanitarian response and call on all parties to allow and facilitate rapid, safe and sustained humanitarian access to those in need. In that context, cross-border assistance is a vital part of the humanitarian response in Syria. Millions of Syrians depend upon such assistance, including nearly 2 million people in Idlib and the neighbouring areas. There is no doubt that the number of those in need will increase in the event of any comprehensive military operation there.

The increasing indications and reports coming in are a matter of concern, and we remind all parties of their responsibilities under international humanitarian law to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure. The systematic attacks against civilian areas, including schools, hospitals and medical facilities in Idlib province and beyond, must cease immediately. Humanitarian and medical personnel must be protected in line with international humanitarian law. In that regard, we reaffirm the need to respect Security Council resolutions, including resolution 2401 (2018), which was submitted by the State of Kuwait and the Kingdom of Sweden in February and which calls for a ceasefire without delay, as well as the delivery of humanitarian aid. We must also respect resolution 2286 (2016), on the protection of hospitals and medical personnel, and resolution 2427 (2018), on children and armed conflict.

Resolutions that are not implemented on the ground have no value. We underscore the need for accountability and no impunity. We renew our support for the International Independent Commission of Inquiry and the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011.

The Security Council has a humanitarian, moral and legal responsibility to the population of Idlib, and the Council must seek meaningful preventative measures. The series of meetings of the Council on Syria in general, and specifically on Idlib this week, including our meeting today, are critical to that end. We appreciate and support the efforts of Mr. Staffan de Mistura in Idlib and throughout Syria. We reaffirm that the best way to reach a sustainable solution to the Syrian crisis and avoid humanitarian catastrophe, particularly in Idlib, remains a political solution under the auspices of the United Nations, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex).

In conclusion, the State of Kuwait and the Kingdom of Sweden will do their utmost to push the Security Council towards exploring all meaningful options and to ensure that the Council closely follows the developments in Idlib. As co-penholders and significant donors to the humanitarian response in Syria, we will continue to play our role to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people and to ensure that the Security Council upholds its responsibilities in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and the relevant Security Council resolutions.

Mr. Delattre (France) (*spoke in French*): I thank the United States presidency for convening this meeting, which comes at a critical moment and allows us to reiterate collectively our serious concerns about the situation in Idlib. I also thank Mr. John Ging and Mr. Staffan de Mistura for their very enlightening briefings and commitment and that of their teams.

Let us go straight to the facts. Syria is once again on the verge of abyss, as the Idlib area has become a humanitarian, migration and security time bomb. That is the three-alarm fire that we would face in the event of a massive military offensive on the part of the regime. The risk is considerable and clearly defined. In recent history, few disasters have been as clearly anticipated and been the subject of as many convergent warnings by the international community. As the moment of truth approaches, those repeated warnings, made through all means available, must be fully grasped by the stakeholders. That is the very purpose of today's meeting and there is not a minute to lose.

As we speak, a large-scale military offensive by the regime, supported by its allies, appears to be imminent in Idlib, where hundreds of thousands of Syrians have taken refuge throughout the conflict. As John Ging and Staffan de Mistura reminded us, Idlib counts almost 3 million inhabitants. More than half of them have already been displaced from other parts of Syria. In that context, a large-scale military offensive would create a new humanitarian disaster, given that those civilians have nowhere else to go. We are now only all too familiar with how such offensives repeatedly play out, entailing large-scale violations of international humanitarian law with deliberate, deadly attacks on civilians, indiscriminate air raids and the risk of the renewed use of chemical weapons by the regime. Such an offensive would also lead to a major migration crisis for northern Syria, Turkey, and potentially Europe and even other parts of the world. Such an offensive would also pose a serious threat to regional security with the spillover of jihadist fighters there. Lastly, a large-scale military operation would have repercussions in Europe and even beyond.

Given the gravity of the situation and the stakes, we call on the Astana guarantors, who are meeting today in Tehran and have the means at their disposal to stop events from spiralling out of control — especially Syria, Russia and Iran — to shoulder their responsibilities and commit to three imperatives: to respect the ceasefire, of which they are the guarantors; to guarantee full, safe and unhindered humanitarian access throughout Syria, while protecting civilians; and to make way for a process leading to a credible political solution to the Syrian crisis. Respect for the ceasefire is the only viable path.

Let us make no mistake — the goal is to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe and not merely to manage it as best as we can. Those supporting the Syrian regime have the means to prevent such a crisis, as the regime does not have the ability to act alone. A new massacre would therefore be the responsibility and the failure of the regime's supporters. Conversely, they can still halt the escalation and show the world that they have paved the way for a peaceful settlement. There is still time to avoid disaster in Idlib, but once again there is not a minute to spare. That is why we call on Russia and Iran to ensure the maintenance of the Idlib region as the last de-escalation zone, to protect civilians and to respect and enforce full respect for international humanitarian law there.

I welcome the steps taken by the United Nations to prevent escalation and its significant efforts to help the civilian population, as John Ging mentioned earlier. I

also welcome Turkey's efforts to that end. For its part, France has been fully engaged, in particular alongside Presidents Erdoğan and Putin, to avoid any offensive and to relaunch the political process. At the same time, we must do everything possible to ensure safe, full and unhindered humanitarian access and the protection of civilians, civilian infrastructure and humanitarian personnel. We commend the difficult work of the United Nations on the ground and encourage Mark Lowcock, his team and John Ging to persevere in their requests to the Syrian authorities.

I also recall the crucial nature of aid provided by cross-border convoys, authorized by resolution 2393 (2017). Assistance via Turkey facilitates the daily delivery of vital support to almost 2 million people in the north-west. It is therefore our responsibility to help maintain and strengthen cross-border aid. France will maintain and adapt its assistance accordingly to north-western Syria.

We must be extremely vigilant with regard to exploiting the issue of humanitarian corridors. The forced displacement of thousands of people to areas under the regime's control in the total absence of international supervision would in no way be humanitarian, but would rather amount to war crimes. Priority should continue to be placed on the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Lastly, as our highest-level political authorities have stressed on more than one occasion, I reaffirm in the strongest terms that we will exercise the utmost vigilance concerning any verified renewed use of chemical weapons by the regime and our full resolve to take action in any such situation, alongside the United Kingdom and the United States, as we have stated previously.

Concerning the fight against the terrorist threat, in which France is on the front line, it can in no way justify what we have witnessed in Syria. When the struggle against terrorism is used to justify indiscriminate attacks on civilians and serious violations of international humanitarian law, it becomes merely a pretext whose effect — and perhaps goal — only fuels the terrorism that it asserts to combat.

Everyone here must carefully consider the fact that a massacre in Idlib would undermine the efforts undertaken to reach a political solution. We must therefore strive for a sustainable, inclusive and credible political solution, pursuant to resolution 2254 (2015), which the Council adopted by consensus. In the immediate term, we must support the establishment of a constitutional committee with the help of Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, whom I thank once again. Such a committee must meet as soon as possible and carry out its work in a completely independent manner under the auspices of the United Nations, which is the very prerequisite for its credibility. We all know that this is just one step, and it will be essential to quickly address the issue of the holding of free and fair elections, open to all Syrians, including refugees and internally displaced persons, as well as the creation of a neutral environment conducive to the restoration of trust and the implementation substantive reforms. Those will be essential steps, and that is the only way to avoid the prolongation of the crisis *ad vitam æternam*.

In conclusion, I stress that a deadly offensive in Idlib would mark not the end of the Syrian crisis, as certain experts in the art of confusion would have us believe, but rather the beginning of a new phase in the protracted Syrian tragedy, which would be characterized by radicalization, instability, an endless cycle of the same causes and effects, the entrenchment of terrorism and a possible geographic spread of the conflict. Beyond the looming humanitarian disaster, that is what is at stake in Idlib.

Our collective responsibility is to look to the future. The European Union and several partners have clearly reiterated that they can assist in rebuilding Syria only when an irreversible, credible and inclusive political transition is indeed under way. There will be no blank cheque for Syria or a massive return of refugees without confidence-building measures that guarantee a secure environment. Contrary to what the regime and its allies would have us believe, it is clear that it is not the lack of rebuilding that prevents the return of refugees, but rather the lack of credible progress in the political process.

We are therefore at a crossroads. France again calls on the Astana guarantors to respect the ceasefire because an escalation of violence is in no one's interest and, as we speak, could even be avoided. That alone will enable us to move towards an inclusive political solution. It is in our best interest and above all that of the Syrian people. On behalf of France and in support of the Geneva process, I invite us all to forge ahead towards a political solution that is within reach if we unite our efforts and overcome all difficulties.

Mr. Ndong Mba (Equatorial Guinea) (*spoke in Spanish*): My delegation welcomes the convening of today's meeting and thanks Special Envoy for Syria Staffan De Mistura and Director John Ging for their enlightening and objective briefings. We reiterate Equatorial Guinea's support for their noble efforts in an extremely difficult environment.

I will focus my statement in particular on the ongoing military rumblings in Idlib, on the serious humanitarian situation in the province, and, lastly, on the importance of not obstructing the political process to bring about lasting peace in Syria.

Equatorial Guinea is deeply concerned about the situation in the Syrian province of Idlib and the possible catastrophic humanitarian consequences in the event of a large-scale military offensive. The war in Syria, which has been ravaging the country since 2011, has reached its climax. According to reports, reports of Government troops near Idlib suggest an imminent escalation of violence in the area. It should be recalled that Idlib, the last terrorist enclave, controlled by and large by the terrorist group Tahrir Al-Sham, also known as the Al-Nusra Front, as well as by armed opposition groups, is part of the de-escalation zone in northern Syria, sponsored by the Astana guarantors.

The United Nations estimates that there are almost 3 million people in that de-escalation zone, including nearly 1.4 million internally displaced persons and 2.1 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. In line with the Secretary-General's communiqué of 29 August, we urgently call on all parties to exercise restraint and prioritize the protection of civilians. We further encourage all parties to take all measures necessary to safeguard civilian life, allow freedom of movement and ensure the protection of civilian infrastructure, including medical and educational facilities, in keeping with international human rights law and international humanitarian law.

The international community must avoid any military imbroglio in Idlib at all costs. If it does not, in future meetings of the Council we will be forced to discuss its direct and deleterious consequences, such as the possible use of chemical substances as weapons of war against civilians and, according to United Nations estimates, the approximately 1 million displaced people and more than $300 million needed to respond to the imminent humanitarian catastrophe.

On the political front, we reiterate our firm commitment to an inclusive political process, under the auspices of the United Nations, in line with resolution 2254 (2015). We hope that the tripartite summit, held today in Tehran among the Astana guarantors — the Russian Federation, Iran and Turkey — as well as the upcoming meetings of the Special Envoy on 10 and 11 September, will lead to consensus-based actions for the establishment of a truly representative constitutional committee, thereby paving the way for a definitive settlement to the conflict. We agree with the Special Envoy, who recently stated that it is necessary to maintain moral pressure on the warring parties so as to prevent a drastic military offensive and allow more time for a sustainable solution that can combat terrorism and save civilians.

We understand that in an increasingly multipolar world, the balance among Powers no longer depends solely on their economic capabilities, but also on their military capabilities. The allies of the parties involved in this politico-military labyrinth must seek another mechanism or scenario to test their military might. It is inconceivable to continue sacrificing the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people to live in peace, stability and lasting progress at the altar of economic and geostrategic interests. For eight years, millions of innocent people have suffered direct consequences of the war and its collateral damage, which is both devastating and horrific.

Idlib cannot be compared to any other region. The city is home not only to the fighters who settled there with their families, following their evacuation from Aleppo, eastern Ghouta, Dar'a and Quneitra, under the co-called reconciliation agreement, but also to civilians who have nothing to do with the war and have simply sought refuge there. Hundreds of thousands of people took refuge in Idlib because they were told they would be safe there. Russia, Turkey and Iran had decreed it to be a de-escalation zone, but today the warring parties have taken those people hostage. Equatorial Guinea calls on Russia, Turkey and Iran, as well as the United States and Western and Gulf countries with influence in the area, to do their utmost to ensure that those with weapons and power will , for the first time in this war, make civilians their top priority.

I conclude by citing Mr. Jan Egeland, head of the United Nations humanitarian task force on Syria, who spoke recently of the intense ongoing political and humanitarian negotiation on Syria. He said:

"If it succeeds we will have hundreds of thousands of lives spared, if it fails in the next days and hours we could see a battle more cruel than any previous battle in the cruelest war of our generation".

Ms. Wronecka (Poland): We are grateful to the presidency for convening today's meeting on the deteriorating humanitarian and security situation in Idlib. Allow me to thank Mr. Staffan de Mistura and Mr. John Ging for their informative briefings.

The conflict raging in Syria and the resulting violence and violations of international law, including human rights law, have brought suffering to the civilian population of Syria at a scale that is unique in today's world. We are concerned about the possible intensification of hostilities in Idlib. Once again, we stress that there is no military solution to the conflict and that any attempt to bring about peace by force would be counterproductive to an inclusive and credible political process, under the auspices of the United Nations.

In the context of the current situation in Idlib, let me reiterate Poland's position.

First, we call on the Astana guarantors and other actors with influence on the ground to live up to their commitments and to take all actions necessary to protect the civilian population of Idlib. Secondly, we stress again the need to secure full and unhindered humanitarian access to Syria, including Idlib, and to take all measures necessary to enhance the protection of humanitarian workers. Thirdly, refugees must be given an opportunity for a safe, free and dignified return to their homes. A major military operation in Idlib governorate may hinder that goal and consequently create a new wave of refugees. The Idlib governorate, having the highest number of internally displaced persons in all of Syria, requires our special, cautious approach.

Our particular concern is that we are witnessing the destruction of Syria's crucial civilian infrastructure, including medical and educational facilities. Such destruction must stop immediately, in accordarce with international humanitarian law and human rights law. Intense bombardments and the shelling of schools and hospitals in Idlib and other governorates not only have *an immediate and catastrophic impact* on the living conditions of civilians, but also significantly diminish future efforts to bring about reconciliation in Syria and to commence Syria's major reconstruction.

Poland is particularly concerned over the fate of the most vulnerable victims of conflict: children, women and members of religious minorities. We are alarmed by the situation of children affected by the conflict, especially in Idlib. Many children have been forced to leave their homes in other parts of Syria, seeking safe refuge in Idlib governorate, although they also face the risk of violence, displacement and loss of family members. The escalation of military activities would result in a major humanitarian tragedy, with children falling victim once again.

At the same time, Poland strongly advocates women's participation and empowerment in all aspects of the process of finding a solution for the conflict in Syria. While many men have been killed, imprisoned or forced to leave their homes for war, women are faced with the task of caring for their families in dire circumstances in a display of heroism, perseverance and resilience.

Let me conclude by emphasizing our concern about the possibility of another chemical attack in Syria. The use of chemical weapons is not only a horrifying act of barbarism, but also an illegal act that could have devastating consequences for the civilian population. The perpetrators of such crimes must be aware that the international community will do its best to bring them to justice.

Mr. Meza-Cuadra (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): We welcome the convening of this meeting and the important briefings by Mr. Staffan de Mistura and Mr. John Ging. We also appreciate their tireless efforts and those of their teams.

Peru observes with deep regret and concern the continuation of the conflict in Syria. We note with alarm the prospect of a new escalation of violence in the town of Idlib and the devastating humanitarian consequences that it would bring. The levels of violence and suffering registered in Aleppo and eastern Ghouta, among other locations of the protracted conflict, prompt us to underline the responsibility of the Council to protect some 3 million people in Idlib, including more than 1 million children. In a few days, we could be talking about tens of thousands of new fatalities and some 700,000 newly displaced persons, according to United Nations estimates. That does not include the wounded and the destruction of civilian infrastructure.

We must also anticipate the serious repercussions that a new display of barbarism would have on the

peace process that, with the support of the Council, is being promoted by the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General. That could lead to the further destabilization of the Middle East and to new tensions among the permanent members of the Council, which have a special responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security.

In that context, we emphasize the applicability of the principle of the peaceful settlement of disputes, as enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations. We also recall that resolution 2401 (2018), which must be enforced and implemented, calls for a ceasefire on all Syrian territory. The Council, and especially the countries with influence on the ground, must act to ensure that the parties to the conflict abandon the military track and the contempt they have shown for international law and international humanitarian law by acting with impunity.

Peru emphatically condemns terrorism and believes that terrorist groups that remain in Idlib and other parts of Syrian territory must be held accountable before the courts for the crimes they have committed. But we emphasize that in no case does that justify further massacres of civilians. In that regard, we highlight the spirit of unity and commitment expressed on Wednesday by the 10 elected members of the Council in conveying a message of concern that emphasizes the urgent need to prioritize the protection of civilians in Idlib.

We hope that the Astana guarantors, meeting today in Tehran, will be able to agree on a formula to prevent the tragedy looming over the civilian population of Idlib, and on that basis support the political process based on resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex).

Dag Hammarskjöld, alluding to the horrors of the Second World War, famously stated that the Organization was "not created in order to bring us to heaven, but in order to save us from hell" (*SG/382, p.7*). A few months ago, however, Secretary-General António Guterres described eastern Ghouta as "hell on earth" (*S/PV.8185, p. 2*). We believe that it is time for the Council to act with unity and commitment to prevent Idlib from becoming a new scene of horror and suffering.

Mr. Ipo (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): My delegation would like to thank the American presidency of the Council for organizing this meeting on the latest developments in Syria and, more particularly, in Idlib governorate. We also thank Mr. Staffan de Mistura and Mr. John Ging for their excellent briefings.

Reports of the imminent large-scale and intense fighting between belligerents in Idlib governorate are a source of great concern for my country, inter alia, because of the risk of exacerbating the already dire humanitarian situation. Indeed, of the approximate 3 million inhabitants of Idlib governorate, 2 million — or two-thirds — face pressing humanitarian needs. In addition, according to the estimates of the United Nations and humanitarian agencies, the resumption of fighting in Idlib governorate would cause a massive displacement of between 450,000 and 750,000 people.

The certain humanitarian disaster that would result from the escalation of fighting is compounded by the risk of the possible use of chemical weapons by the belligerents. That tragic and alarming event, in my delegation's view, would once again constitute a breach of international law on the protection of civilians in armed conflict and undermine the international legal mechanisms in the area of non-proliferation.

That is why Côte d'Ivoire wishes to reaffirm its principled position that there is no alternative to the search for peace through a frank and inclusive dialogue in Syria. We therefore condemn any use of force as a means of conflict resolution and urge all Syrian parties to prioritize political dialogue, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015), which lays out the road map for the peace process in the country.

In conclusion, my country calls on the parties to the conflict in Syria to exercise restraint to prevent any deterioration of the humanitarian and security situation, and urges them to strictly respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and human rights law. It therefore calls on them to fulfil their obligations to protect civilians in conflict situations and to refrain from any action that could impede the delivery of humanitarian aid to distressed populations.

Mr. Ma Zhaoxu (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I would like to thank Special Envoy De Mistura and Director John Ging for the briefings. We commend their efforts to facilitate the political process and alleviate the humanitarian situation in Syria.

China has been closely following the political process and humanitarian situation in Syria. We note that some areas in Syria are rebuilding hospitals and schools and repairing transportation, power and other

infrastructure. Refugees and internally displaced persons are gradually returning to their homes. The international community should further scale up its humanitarian assistance by providing much-needed help to all the areas in need within Syria.

That said, the situation in Syria remains challenging. The political process is faltering, coupled with rampant terrorist activities and high tensions in some parts of Syria, especially Idlib. Given the current situation, we call on all the relevant parties to step up their diplomatic efforts, address issues through dialogue, and facilitate de-escalation through dialogue. The international community should pool its efforts and continue to resolutely combat terrorism and consolidate the gains achieved to date.

Meanwhile, we call on all parties to do everything possible to avoid harming innocent civilians. All parties are duty-bound to adhere to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and other recognized basic norms governing international relations, fully respect Syrian sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity, and avoid the wilful use of force or threat of force.

China has always stood for a political settlement to the issue of Syria, which represents the only path to peace and stability in Syria. The international community should provide steady support to the United Nations as the main mediator and to Special Envoy De Mistura in his efforts to facilitate the resumption of the Geneva peace talks. The international community should act on the principle of a Syrian-owned, Syrian-led process and on resolution 2254 (2015) in pushing all parties in Syria to engage in inclusive political dialogue in search of a solution that responds to the realities on the ground, while accommodating the concerns of all parties. Special Envoy De Mistura will hold discussions with the relevant parties on the establishment of a Syrian constitutional committee. All parties should exert their influence and push the Syrian Government and opposition groups to move towards each other with a view to achieving early results and adding new momentum to the Syrian political process.

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I thank the Special Envoy. I also thank John Ging very much, as well as the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Kuwait for being here with us today.

This is a terrible situation. I think that what we are hearing today is very strong support for the primacy of the political process, as well as a very strong appeal for there not to be an all-out military offensive against civilians in Idlib. I would just like to echo those two things right out front before I go into the bulk of my remarks. I think the French representative put it very well when he talked about the importance of this issue for international peace and security.

I want to begin by again thanking the Special Envoy and his team for everything they do, and obviously the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. We are very grateful to those humanitarian organizations and workers who are making tireless efforts in the most difficult circumstances to provide aid to people across Idlib. Once again, we are reminded of the importance of cross-border assistance as a critical lifeline for civilians who otherwise cannot be reached.

We very much support the urgent diplomatic efforts being made by Turkey and the United Nations to deal with Idlib, both on the civilian side and on the humanitarian side. The fate of nearly 3 million people is at stake, and we would very much appreciate a briefing on Astana. I suspect that is not possible today, but if it were possible we would appreciate a briefing from the Department of Political Affairs. We hope that Russia and Iran will use their influence to live up to their commitments to uphold the de-escalation arrangements that they have agreed, and we urge them to do so and to reach a negotiated way forward with Turkey. If there is anything that my Government can do to assist in that process, we will happily do it.

On the military situation, like other speakers we are very concerned at the reports in the past few days of dozens of Russian air strikes against areas of Idlib. Local monitoring organizations have reported 38 civilian casualties as a result of the strikes on 4 September alone. I have already said that nearly 3 million civilians are at risk of their lives in Idlib. The United Nations estimates that there are at a maximum 15,000 fighters for the terrorist groups, which is 0.5 per cent of the total population. We too in Britain know what it is like to suffer from terrorism, but those figures are very stark. I would just like to echo what the Minister said about the doctrine of proportionality, discrimination and precaution.

The Secretary-General has been clear that the systematic use of indiscriminate weapons in populated areas may amount to war crimes. We should be crystal

clear about that. There are more babies in Idlib than there are terrorists, and I think that should give those engaging in military action pause for thought. The last time we discussed the issue of the military side, we were in the consultations room and I read out our understanding of which Syrian military units were in the vicinity of Idlib. In echoing the Secretary-General's call, I would like to read those units out in the Chamber. I would like to make very clear that if there is a major offensive against civilians, with mass civilian casualties in Idlib, then those are the people that the international community will be holding accountable for those abuses and violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.

Our understanding is that the overall head of the Syrian army is the Minister of Defence, General Ali Abdullah Ayyoub, but the primary unit deployed to the Idlib area is the 4th Armoured Division to the west side of Idlib. Maher Al-Assad is the overall commander of that unit, but we believe that Major General Ali Mahmoud is the Deputy Commander. We understand that the Syrian Republican Guard is probably deployed to the east side, around Abu Al-Duhur, and that its commander is Major General Talal Makhlouf. Tiger Forces are likely deployed to the south-east side, and their commander is Brigadier General Suheil "The Tiger" Al-Hassan. Then we think that there are also Second Corps and Fifth Corps units in the area, and the commander we know about for that is Major General Aous Aslan. As I say, if there is a major offensive against Idlib, then, in addition to the Syrian regime, those commanders and units will be held accountable by the international community.

If I may, I would like to say a word about the aid package for Idlib. The United Kingdom has announced an additional aid package to ensure that the most vulnerable receive the medical treatment, food, water and support they desperately need. The $15 million in new aid includes support to medical centres and mobile clinics and psychological support. We are also backing new technology that provides civilians with early warnings, in the hope of saving lives in communities bombarded by air strikes. Thanks to that, we believe we have been able to warn more than 2 million people and have reduced casualties by up to 27 per cent in areas under heavy bombardment. However, donors should not have to do that. Donors are not a substitute for the Syrian regime, with Russian support, stopping the campaign against their own civilians.

I would like to conclude by reiterating that we support Turkey's efforts to reach a peaceful solution and avert a humanitarian catastrophe. We call on Russia to do more to restrain the Syrian authorities from attacking Idlib and to bring about de-escalation. We also call on all parties to respect international humanitarian law.

I will not touch on the issue of chemical weapons because we addressed it in the Chamber yesterday (see S/PV.8344). I would like to end by echoing the comments made by the representative of Equatorial Guinea with regard to the primary importance of the political process and bringing an end to this cruel war.

Mr. Van Oosterom (Netherlands): I thank you, Madam President, for convening today's meeting on such an urgent and grave subject. We thank Mr. Staffan de Mistura and Mr. John Ging for their informative briefings and continued efforts to help the people of Syria.

The Kingdom of the Netherlands is extremely concerned about the situation in Idlib. We fear a repeat of a horrific scenario we have seen before — the massive use of military force with a ground campaign by the Syrian army, air raids by Russia and support from Iran, at the cost of thousands of innocent lives, with disastrous humanitarian consequences. There is no military solution that will bring about long-term peace in Syria. We need a political transition and a political solution. In that regard, I will focus on three issues: first, the need to prevent a further escalation of violence in Idlib; secondly, the humanitarian situation; and, thirdly, the political process.

First, we must prevent further escalation in Idlib. We must prevent further military escalation in the last de-escalation zone in Syria. Almost 3 million people are trapped in the Idlib area. As clearly stated by the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Kuwait just now, the humanitarian consequences of an all-out offensive will be disastrous. Furthermore, the risk of regional escalation is high, including the creation of possible new flows of refugees. Parties must uphold international humanitarian law throughout Syria, and in Idlib in particular. We heard from the countries involved that their aim to fight terrorists. Let me remind them that any measure to counter terrorism must comply with their obligations under international law, in particular human rights law, international refugee law and international humanitarian law. Combating terrorism is no excuse for launching attacks without distinction or

proportionality. Combating terrorism is no excuse for attacking innocent civilians, destroying hospitals and killing humanitarian workers. Combating terrorism is no excuse for creating a humanitarian disaster.

The guarantors of the Idlib de-escalation zone and the Syrian regime must work towards a non-violent negotiated solution. We express our strong support for the urgent diplomatic efforts made by Turkey and the United Nations. In view of the meeting of the Astana guarantors in Tehran today, we call on them, in particular Russia and Iran, to uphold the ceasefire and their agreed de-escalation arrangements. Their earlier commitments include the protection of civilians as a matter of priority. They must protect civilians, not attack them.

Secondly, with 1.4 million internally displaced persons in Idlib, the humanitarian situation is already of great concern. Many people in Idlib depend on humanitarian aid for their daily survival. For the sake of those civilians, once again, we call for the full implementation of all Security Council resolutions, including resolution 2401 (2018), which was made possible by our Kuwaiti and Swedish colleagues.

During the war in Syria, we have seen indiscriminate air strikes and attacks on hospitals and schools. Now we know that the Russian military and the Syrian military have been informed about the exact coordinates of the remaining hospitals in Idlib, any future attack on such essential civilian infrastructure therefore falls under their full responsibility. Humanitarian workers are not a target. Attacks on hospitals and humanitarian aid workers are an affront to human decency. Attacking innocent doctors and nurses is a criminal act. Aid to the people in Idlib must be made available. Parties must grant sustained, unimpeded humanitarian access, including through the essential cross-border mechanism. Without that access, a humanitarian catastrophe is inevitable. The Council should provide a positive response to the five requests Mr. Ging mentioned earlier.

Lastly, we need an inclusive, United Nations-led political process on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015), which includes a political transition that aims to address the root causes of the conflict and lay to rest its source. As I stated before, there will be no reconstruction aid before a sustainable political transition is in place. We fully support Staffan de Mistura and commend him and this team on their persistent efforts.

In conclusion, we will continue our efforts for accountability for mass atrocities and the use of chemical weapons in Syria. At the moment, one member of the Council continues to block the referral of the situation to the International Criminal Court. Therefore, we will continue our efforts for accountability for the mass atrocities committed in Syria and elsewhere, outside of the country. Impunity cannot and will not prevail.

Mr. Llorentty Solíz (Plurinational State of Bolivia) (*spoke in Spanish*): My delegation would like to thank the Special Envoy for Syria, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, and the Director of Operations and Advocacy in the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Mr. John Ging, for their briefings. We understand their immense responsibility. Let me reiterate my delegation's full support for their work.

Once again, we underscore our concerns about the possible escalation of violence in Idlib - a city home to, as mentioned earlier, approximately 3 million people, of whom 1.4 million are internally displaced. Many are children who could face internal displacement. That could lead to a humanitarian disaster and increase the number of people who have lost their lives to the conflict over the past eight years. In that regard, we believe that there is an urgent need to fully implement resolution 2401 (2018). We hope that the meeting taking place among the signatories of the Astana agreements will shed light on how the Security Council can meet its aspirations. We call on the parties to continue to monitor the implementation of those agreements. We reiterate that we must prevent the escalation of violence and instead provide humanitarian assistance to the 2.1 million civilians in need in Idlib. Ongoing coordination is essential in order to facilitate better access for humanitarian convoys, including the cross-border convoys.

We believe that any effort or measure to combat terrorism necessarily requires protecting civilian lives, including complying with obligations under international law, including the Charter of the United Nations and the relevant international conventions and protocols. We are keen to hear the suggestions of Mr. De Mistura with regard to protecting civilians.

We stress the need to ensure that populated areas and the entire territory are cleared of explosive remnants of war, including in the city of Raqqa. That is a crucially important and urgent task, not only to

reduce the risks posed to the delivery of humanitarian assistance but also since steps must be taken to avoid fatalities among medical crews, humanitarian workers and ultimately the civilian population as they return to their cities of origin, including in Idlib province. Moreover, we underscore that any returns must be voluntary, unimpeded, dignified and secure.

We reiterate the importance that all parties respect their obligations under international law, especially international humanitarian law. When we say "all parties", we intend what was noted by the representative of Equatorial Guinea: not only those States directly involved but also those States financing the armed groups present in Idlib.

We must ensure the protection of civilians, schools and hospitals. It is imperative that such civilian objects not be used as the targets for attacks, and likewise the workforce of the various humanitarian agencies on the ground must be protected.

We reject any attempts to split up Syria. It is up to the Syrian people to freely determine their future and their political leadership in a context of sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. We must therefore continue supporting the efforts of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria.

In conclusion, we stress that there can be no military solution to the conflict in Syria and the only alternative is through an inclusive political process of dialogue negotiated, agreed and led by the Syrian people through the implementation of the final statement of the Syrian National Dialogue Congress, held in Sochi in January, and the establishment of a constitutional committee, a process that should be facilitated by the United Nations in keeping with the Geneva process and in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015).

Finally, while underscoring this matter is the responsibility of the Security Council and its 15 members, as the Permanent Representative of Peru said, the permanent members bear particular responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. We can only hope that in their decision-making it is not their military interests that prevail but rather the purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations.

Ms. Guadey (Ethiopia): We thank Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura for his briefing. We support and appreciate his indefatigable efforts in the search for a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis and in response to the urgent and difficult situation in Idlib. We also thank Director John Ging of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs for his briefing. We commend the United Nations and its humanitarian partners for continuing to provide much-needed assistance to all in need under extremely challenging circumstances.

We are concerned about the situation in Idlib and the possibility of a humanitarian disaster should the fighting escalate. We recognize that there are United Nations-designated terrorists in Idlib, who must be defeated through coordinated international efforts. What worries us is that military escalation would aggravate the humanitarian crisis in a province where there are approximately 1.4 million people who have already been displaced, and exacerbate the suffering of vulnerable groups. We therefore believe that everything possible should be done to protect the lives of millions of civilians. In that regard, we appreciate ongoing consultations, particularly among the Astana guarantors, as Idlib is a de-escalation zone. We sincerely hope that the key summit of the Astana guarantors that is taking place today will lead to a productive and meaningful outcome in finding a more sustainable solution to the complex situation in Idlib.

We also call on all States that have influence over Syrian actors to play a constructive role in the efforts to avoid a humanitarian disaster in Idlib. We are convinced that it is in such difficult situations that all those with influence should work together in a genuine spirit of cooperation, which would demonstrate the primacy and power of diplomacy.

While we advocate a sustainable solution to the Idlib situation, the humanitarian work of the United Nations and its humanitarian partners should also be fully supported so as to continue reaching all those in need of humanitarian assistance. That will require the protection of civilians and humanitarian workers. In that regard, the offer of the Special Envoy to intervene to help ensure the safety of civilians should be considered with the ultimate objective of doing everything possible to protect civilians in the province.

We further reiterate that all parties should ensure safe, unimpeded and sustained humanitarian access. In addition, as we have heard from Director Ging, the United Nations and its humanitarian partners need additional funding to respond to the growing humanitarian needs and to implement the preparedness

plan that he mentioned. Hence, we encourage all donors to extend their generous assistance.

Finally, the people of Syria have experienced unspeakable tragedy over the past seven years. What they need and deserve is a comprehensive and sustainable political solution that meets their legitimate aspirations. While we fully recognize that avoiding further military escalation for the sake of civilians is our current priority, the crisis in Idlib and across all of Syria can be resolved only through political dialogue. There is no military solution. Therefore, at this highly decisive and critical time, the Security Council should support the tireless efforts of the Special Envoy both to avoid the worst-case scenario in Idlib and to establish a constitutional committee that could lead to the reinvigoration of the political process, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015).

In that regard, we note with appreciation that the Special Envoy has scheduled consultations for next week with relevant States that may have influence on the process. Ultimately, it is through such consultations and, more important, a comprehensive, Syrian-led and -owned dialogue facilitated by the United Nations, that lasting solutions to the crisis in Idlib and the whole of Syria may be found.

Mr. Umarov (Kazakhstan): We join others in thanking Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura and the Director of Operations and Advocacy in the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Mr. John Ging, for their comprehensive and very informative briefings on the matter before us. Current developments around Idlib province could easily lead to a deterioration of the humanitarian situation in the region, together with further human casualties among civilians.

Recalling that the Russian military forces were invited by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to counter terrorism in the country, we believe that will enable the definitive liberation of the entire territory of the country, with favourable conditions created for a political settlement on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015).

We encourage the guarantor States of the Astana process and other stakeholders to continue consultations on the search for peaceful ways to liberate Idlib province from terrorist elements. Separating the terrorist groups from moderate opposition forces that are ready for peaceful negotiations with Government forces could be a way forward, as Staffan de Mistura suggests.

We urge the parties to the conflict not to allow a humanitarian catastrophe to occur. To let the situation unravel would be to negate all the good efforts to resolve the Syrian crisis in the framework of the Geneva talks and the Astana process.

Kazakhstan supports the intention of Mr. De Mistura to hold meetings on 10 and 11 September within the framework of the Astana process, especially as the situation around Idlib is escalating. We appreciate the constructive role of the United Nations Special Envoy in the process of seeking a political settlement in Syria.

We hope that the Tehran summit of the Presidents of the guarantor States of the Astana process — Russia, Turkey and Iran — will promote a mutually acceptable decision to restore confidence between the parties in conflict, facilitate progress on the humanitarian situation and invigorate the process towards a political solution.

We also support the efforts of the guarantor States of the Astana process to assist Syrians in restoring unity in the country and achieve a political settlement of the ongoing conflict through inclusive dialogue. That can be achieved by supporting a constitution backed by the Syrian people under appropriate United Nations supervision. Kazakhstan calls for stepping up joint efforts aimed at implementing the confidence-building measures arrived at within the framework of the Astana process, including the release of detainees and abductees, the handing over of bodies, the identification of missing persons and other arrangements.

We believe that the international community should direct its joint efforts at creating the conditions for settling the intra-Syrian conflict by exclusively peaceful means in order to rebuild this ruined country and address the complex humanitarian situation. We must also consider creating appropriate conditions for the return of Syria's numerous refugees. Kazakhstan believes that the active restoration of Syria must continue, regardless of jurisdictions. Kazakhstan is ready to do its utmost to address all issues related to regional and global security.

Mr. Skoog (Sweden): The Deputy Foreign Minister of Kuwait also spoke on behalf of Sweden this morning, so I can be very brief and reiterate some of the key points that he and others made.

I think that the way in which Idlib is different from Aleppo, eastern Ghouta and Dara'a has been

clearly stated. The people there have nowhere left to flee to. The size of the population, 3 million, has been mentioned, and it includes many children and internally displaced persons. The catastrophic consequences of a full-scale military escalation have been highlighted, not least by this morning's briefers, Mr. John Ging and Mr. Staffan de Mistura. Many have expressed their grave concern about the escalating military action by Syria and Russia, which have been reminded, along with other parties, of their obligation to protect civilians in accordance with international humanitarian law. Theirs is the primary responsibility for preventing further humanitarian disaster.

It has also been stressed around the table how important it is that the Astana guarantors, who are meeting at the highest level today, immediately implement their own de-escalation agreement in Idlib and prioritize the protection of civilians. I echo the many speakers who have emphasized how urgent it is that the guarantors act now in order to avoid the enormous humanitarian catastrophe that would unfold before our eyes if there were to be a large-scale military offensive in Idlib.

So while it is clear where the responsibilities lie, it is also incumbent on the Council to continue to explore all meaningful preventive options. We have therefore advocated for this meeting in order to enable the Council to prevent this scenario, to express our support to Mr. De Mistura and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and to push for a political solution. We hope that the clear public calls that have been made around the table today and by the 10 elected members earlier this week and the European Union members yesterday (*see S/PV.8344*) will have the desired effect.

But we are also prepared to sit down in close consultation with Mr. De Mistura today, over the weekend or whenever, if need be, in order to explore any concrete meaningful suggestions and proposals to ensure that the Council also collectively shoulders its responsibility and explores and fully exhausts all possible preventive actions.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank Mr. De Mistura and Mr. Ging for their briefings. The United States presidency has formulated the topic of today's meeting in a curious way. It has been convened at the initiative of some Council members of the Security Council to consider the situation in the Middle East, with an emphasis on the situation in Idlib. It would appear that Idlib is some kind of separate State entity. We would like to remind the Council that it is an integral part of the Syrian Arab Republic, whose sovereignty and territorial integrity we hope no one questions.

In that connection, Mr. De Mistura's statement to the effect that the Syrian authorities have every right to fight for the restoration of control throughout their territory is very apposite. Furthermore, it is an obligation of the Syrian Government towards its people. We should remember that in eastern Aleppo, Ghouta, the southern suburbs of Damascus, Qalamoun, Dara'a, Quneitra and other difficult areas, it was not peaceful civilians who were evacuated, but rather full-on fighters who had refused to lay down their weapons and return to a normal life as law-abiding citizens.

Nobody disputes the fact that in the Idlib de-escalation zone there is a large number of Jabhat Al-Nusra terrorists who pose a threat to international peace and security. It is that large, militarily capable terrorist group's operations that is determining the current situation in that part of Syria, and its members are striving to keep the area under their control, and the fact that the situation is at a standstill is unacceptable. The de-escalation agreements stipulate that they are temporary, and the relevant Security Council resolutions clearly state that none of the cessation-of-hostilities regimes apply to terrorist organizations. The fight against them must go on, and in that regard we have consistently called on the international community to act decisively, according to the same rules and on a basis of cooperation. It is self-evident that it is not acceptable to preserve terrorist potential for political aims, whatever they may be. It is not acceptable to make all kinds of efforts to create obstacles to the return of Syrian refugees to a country that has largely been rid of terrorists. It is not acceptable to make every effort to obstruct the process of rebuilding Syria and subject it to political conditions. That only attests to the fact that, in reality, our Western partners have absolutely no interest in the fate and plight of ordinary civilians.

The terrorists in Idlib are taking aggressive action. They have taken millions of civilians hostage and are conducting raids on surrounding areas and shelling nearby towns and villages. The cessation-of-hostilities regime is being violated dozens of times every day. Russian troops have destroyed 55 unmanned aerial vehicles armed with explosives flown out of the

de-escalation zone. On 4 September, Russian aircraft carried out strikes on confirmed Al-Nusra targets, far from residential areas, in Idlib province. They were caches where drones and their munitions were stored and kept. A storage site for man-portable air defence systems was also destroyed with high-precision weapons. Where did the terrorists get hold of such large quantities of foreign military equipment? Was it directly from the manufacturers? Or was it from the so-called moderate opposition, which has had no problems getting external support? That is an issue that the relevant United Nations bodies should investigate without delay.

Al-Nusra is focusing its efforts on consolidating radically minded illegal armed groups around it. The terrorist leaders are have been making fierce efforts to block the desire of commanders in the field and leaders of local governing bodies to get out of these groups, going as far as eliminating them physically. A typical example of that approach has been the destruction of groups from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant that refused to join Jabhat Al-Nusra and whose remnants, as many as 500 people, had lost control over regions they had previously held and gone underground.

Here are a few statistics. In the Idlib de-escalation zone there are altogether 40 to 45 armed groups whose members total about 50,000. The greatest resistance comes from Jabhat Al-Nusra, with 16,000 members, and other unreconciled groups, totalling 11,300, whose core consists of foreign fighters and Syrians who have the blood of supporters of Damascus on their hands. They include Hizb Al-Islami Al-Turkistani, with some 700 members; Jaysh Al-Izza, with as many as 1,000 members; the radical ranks of Ahrar Al-Sham, with as many as 800 members; Faylak Al-Rahman, with about 5,500 members; Haras Al-Din, about 1,500 members; Nusrat Al-Islam, about 1,900 members; and Jabhat Al-Wataniya lil-Tahrir, with as many as 800 members. A few armed groups — Jabhat Al-Wataniya lil-Tahrir and the radical ranks of Ahrar Al-Sham — are completely dependent on Al-Nusra. Furthermore, many adherents of those groups are unreconciled because they are forced to be, remaining loyal to the extremists out of fear for their lives and the safety of their families.

However, there are still some groups, whose numbers total around 13,300, that are operating in the zone and are willing to reconcile. They include about 2,300 from the Free Syrian Army, 4,000 from Nusrat Al-Islam, 5,000 from Ahrar Al-Sham, 2,000 from Nour Al-Din Al-Zenki, and others. Besides that, most villages are held by local self-defence units of between 30 and 50 people, about 10,000 altogether, who are also disposed to make peace. As many as 80 per cent of the inhabitants of Idlib are sick of the extremists' tyranny and support reverting to the embrace of the State as soon as possible, a mood shared by some fighters who realize the futility of armed resistance. That has been encouraged by the success of reconciliation in other de-escalation zones, security guarantees provided by Russia and work that is being done to ensure refugees' return. I want to point out that schools and medical facilities financed by the Government are still functioning in Idlib and funds from the budget are being earmarked for supporting vital infrastructure and paying civil servants' salaries.

The Russian Federation is making major efforts to resolve the Idlib situation through negotiations. To that end, intense consultations are being held with the Astana process partners and with those on the ground who are actually controlling the situation. A top-level meeting of the guarantor countries is being held in Tehran today.

One effective solution would be to separate the armed opposition groups that want to participate in the political process from the terrorists, who remain a legitimate target for elimination. Many speakers today have called on the Astana process guarantors. We have also frequently turned to our Western partners, but they have not heeded our calls. Unfortunately, the Western capitals led by Washington that are trying to prevent the fall of their extremism-inclined clients' regime have not used their influence or helped to encourage a separation. Instead, they are hatching another round of aggressive plans around high-profile chemical provocations. We are under the distinct impression that in fomenting hysteria over Idlib, our Western partners are trying to prevent the fall of the last major terrorist stronghold in Syria in any way they can, and this is far more about geopolitics than about the humanitarian concern for the protection of civilians that they claim.

The possibility of joining in the initiatives for reconciliation and thereby strengthening the positive trends in Syria is still there. Staffan de Mistura, who is in active contact with the Syrian opposition within the framework of his political mandate, could also send it the same message. We affirm our full commitment to a Syrian-led political process on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015). I will not list everything we have

undertaken to advance the political process. We call on other partners to make a real contribution to it.

The propaganda campaign currently being fomented by Damascus's opponents around Idlib follows the scripts for the scenarios that were predicted when Aleppo and eastern Ghouta were being liberated, but neither of those apocalyptic prognoses materialized, unlike in Raqqa, which has been bombed into the ground by the so-called coalition. The subject of the military occupation by Western countries of areas of Syria, including its humanitarian aspects, clearly warrants special discussion in the Security Council.

The President: I will now make a statement in my national capacity as the representative of the United States of America.

I would first like to thank Mr. Ging and Mr. De Mistura for giving us the latest information about the dire situation in Idlib. I also want to welcome the statement of grave concern about Idlib that the Security Council's 10 elected members delivered yesterday.

The Al-Assad regime and its enablers, Russia and Iran, have a playbook for this war. First, they surround a civilian area. Next, they make the preposterous claim that everyone in the area is a terrorist, so that every man, woman and child becomes a target. Then comes the so-called starve-and-surrender campaign, where they keep attacking until the people no longer have food, clean water or shelter. It is a playbook of death. The regime has spent the last seven years refining it with Russia and Iran's help. It has happened so many times before. In July, it was Dara'a and south-western Syria where the regime trapped and besieged civilians. In February, it was eastern Ghouta. The year before, it was eastern Aleppo, and before that, places like Madaya and Hamah. In the process, the regime has left behind a country of rubble. The atrocities committed by Al-Assad will be a permanent stain on history and a black mark for the Council, which Russia has blocked over and over again from taking action to help.

Now an offensive against Idlib is starting. Despite the clear warnings of the President of the United States and other world leaders, air strikes by Russia and the regime have already begun against civilian areas. The United States has been very clear with Russia and the broader international community. We consider any assault on Idlib to be a dangerous escalation of the conflict in Syria. If Al-Assad, Russia and Iran continue, the consequences will be dire. We heard earlier that 3 million people are at risk in Idlib, 99 per cent of them innocent civilians. To put that in perspective, that is 7.5 times the number of the people whom the Al-Assad regime besieged in eastern Ghouta. It is nearly 11 times the number of people whom the Al-Assad regime trapped in eastern Aleppo. At the time, we said that the level of civilian suffering was unbearable. If the Council can even imagine it, Idlib would be even worse. The Al-Assad regime must halt its offensive. Russia and Iran, as countries with influence over the regime, must stop the catastrophe. It is in their power to do so. Our Russian colleagues claim that they are seeking a political solution to the Syrian conflict, but they do nothing to help us get there. If they support an offensive in Idlib, the world will know where Russia really stands when it comes to supporting peace talks.

The United States is deeply concerned about the presence of terrorists in Idlib. There are many ways to target those groups effectively without causing a humanitarian catastrophe. But when Russia and the Al-Assad regime say they want to counter terrorism, they actually mean that they want to bomb schools, hospitals and homes. They want to punish the civilians who had the courage to rise up against Al-Assad. When the regime calls the brave White Helmets terrorists, we know that they are not serious about fighting terrorism. The United States will not cooperate with Russia in the Al-Assad regime's slaughter of innocent civilians.

Russia also wants the United States and the international community to provide money to rebuild Syria. To translate that, they want us to clean up all the roads, bridges and homes that Russian jets, Iranian-backed militias and Syrian shells have destroyed. The United States will not consider such requests for reconstruction aid until we see concrete results from a genuine political process that ends the war and offers freedom to the Syrian people. No one else should either. That would be absurd. The United States taxpayer is certainly not going to subsidize Al-Assad's campaign of destruction.

There is time still to pursue an alternative. The United States wants to see such a political solution emerge in Syria, one that is based on the road map set out in resolution 2254 (2015). That calls for a real dialogue among Syrians and the drafting of a new constitution, leading to genuine free and fair elections.

But for Russia, continuing to support that murderous dictator and isolating itself from the international

community is the wrong choice. An offensive in Idlib will only leave Syria weaker and more broken and create generations of Syrians who will never forget the heinous and senseless brutality of the Al-Assad regime and its allies.

We urge Russia to consider its options carefully, stop Al-Assad's assault on Idlib and work with us — with the United Nations and international partners — to find peace at last for Syria. The Secretary-General and the overwhelming majority of the members of the Council have made their position very clear: Russia needs to live up to its responsibility and put an end to the fighting. There are no other options for the people of Syria. They have suffered enough.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I again give the floor to Mr. De Mistura for any additional comments that he may wish to make.

Mr. De Mistura: I thank you, Madam President, for again giving me the floor. For this meeting is potentially crucial, as we continue to hope that the meeting in Tehran will be as well — from what we hear, there have been important discussions. Time is of the essence.

Let me start with a picture. I do not know whether Council members can see it properly, but depicted here is an image of women holding candles. They are civilians, as are 98.8 per cent of the people in Idlib. They are our top priority.

I received a letter from 1,000 women in Idlib — women and mothers, not terrorists — who have been urging all of us to remember that they are civilians, internally displaced people, teachers, doctors, nurses, engineers, writers and homemakers, and that they come from many parts of Syria. Idlib therefore symbolizes the mosaic that is Syria. It is true that many of the fighters who were evacuated — or decided to reconcile, evacuate or whatever the terminology was — also went there, but they are a very small group in comparison with those I am referring to. In their letter, the women stated:

> "We invite you, Mr. De Mistura, to Idlib to see for yourself and tell everyone in the world that we are civilians of Idlib whose voices have been silenced and are not being heard. Civilians have been suffering over the past years, and we are hoping that they will not have to suffer any longer. We want a country without war, and we want a future in which we can live."

They too are against terrorism, but they cannot show that because the situation is very difficult. However, they are not expecting to be bombed while terrorists are being identified or addressed.

Let me go into some more substantive aspects.

The reason that all of us were very eager to meet today is because there was an important meeting in Tehran among the Heads of State of Iran, Turkey and Russia. As we are aware, they have been intensely discussing future formulas for Idlib. We do not know the details of what was discussed or what the outcome is. What I got from their meeting is that time is needed and time is of the essence. I hope that more time will be given for discussions among them and among all of us in order to avoid what we all call, and President Erdoğan repeated again today, a potential catastrophe.

There were reports that President Erdoğan put some ideas on the table, and I understand that they were quite substantive. We have not seen them yet, and we are looking forward to hearing more when we meet our Turkish partners and colleagues early next week — and perhaps the Council will be hearing more about them. The signals indicate that they intend to continue talking about how to implement some ideas. On that basis, let me also propose my own idea. Actually, it is an idea I heard from civil society. I know some people say "civil society" when they may be referring to terrorists, but the people I am referring to are very normal people who have been expressing fear about being where they are and about what could happen.

The key dilemma that we are hearing all the time — and it is indeed a dilemma; I feel it too — has to do with how one squares a terrible circle having to do with the fact of the presence of a number of United Nations-listed terrorists. We know that they are terrorists, as they have been clearly identified, but they are a small number in comparison with the 2.9 million people. Then there are almost 3 million people who are just in between and would not like to end up in between.

They key word that I have been hearing, which was also mentioned in Tehran and which we have been hearing for at least three years, is "separation". How do you separate listed terrorist groups and other armed groups that are not terrorists and can be "reconciled" — or at least one can take a different approach in addressing

them — and the general population? I think there is even a reference in paragraph 4 of the joint statement made in Tehran on that. Let us therefore address that aspect. That is where we need more creativity.

I believe one Government official publicly asked why the United Nations did not come up with some ideas on how to separate them. I agree that it is not easy. However, here is a potential plan: turning the table. We have been saying that there are no more Idlibs — I have been saying it and Council members have been saying it, and rightly. However, are Council members sure that within Idlib there are no more Idlibs? Let me explain: perhaps the population should not be moving away. The people that should be moving out of the population centres and the villages are the fighters — the Al-Nusra Front.

That type of idea is potentially doable and is based on some assumptions. The first assumption is that the large majority, that is, 98.5 or 98.8 per cent. of the population in Idlib are civilians, and they have a voice. They are telling us that. They want to use that voice. And they can use that voice in order to produce the separation we are talking about. The second assumption is that Turkey is generally very worried about a potential catastrophe. We heard that from President Erdoğan. Turkey has influence — we know it, Turkey knows it — on armed groups present in the area, and it can exert that influence.

Russia, Iran and the Government of Syria state that their priority is to defeat terrorists in Idlib, or at least to separate them. How can we not agree on that? If that is the case, the main objective of a plan would be to first spare the lives of civilians and to avoid a mass exodus, because that would be a problem. We can handle 700,000 or 800,000, but there are 3 million of them. In which direction will they go? Towards Turkey or towards the Government area, where they are afraid to go? It is therefore important to avoid that effect.

Secondly, we may be able to see whether we can assist separating the population de facto from the extremists and terrorists, and the terrorists from other groups. What could such a plan consist of? Ideally, all militant fighters should be provided with a deadline to move their own military presence and bases away — I repeat, away — from population centres and villages. Population centres would therefore remain under the control of the civilian local councils and local police. That would apply in particular to members of Al-Nusra, who should be notified by the guarantors — especially including Turkey, which has the capacity to send strong messages to them — to evacuate houses and villages. At the same time — and this is the message that I received from the population — a media campaign would be needed to indicate that this is what has been asked of those armed groups, namely, to move out. "Do not remain in my house. Do not remain in my city." Three million people can be mobilized in that context.

Do we have examples of that? Such social mobilization has already been increasing. We have seen not only candle lights, but demonstrations without Al-Nusra's banner. There was an attempt today by Al-Nusra to actually fly its own flag. The people said, "No, we do not want that; we want just to remind everyone that we are civilians". Three million people have a voice, which they can use if they know that we are serious. That would require, of course that, at the same time the Russian Federation ensure this type of plan, together with Turkey, which would be a major player in such an endeavour, and that the population be made aware and mobilized to actually express their voice to tell the fighters that there would be no aerial attacks or major military attacks on any population centre. Otherwise, all this would be futile.

This is not the only plan and could be one of many; for all I know, it could be the plan that President Erdoğan has proposed to President Putin. I really do not know. This plan is based on the common sense of the people whom the United Nations is supposed to represent sometimes — is that not true? — especially in the kind of situation in which they now find themselves. Russia and Turkey, above all, should be the guarantors, together with Iran, of such a plan. Perhaps, the Security Council could then support it.

In conclusion, I believe that we — including me — are constantly raising concerns, stating how tragic and terrible the situation could become and warning about it, while we need to have some concrete plans. I heard of one such plan from the people of Idlib.

The President: I thank Mr. De Mistura for sharing that additional information from the citizens of Syria.

I now give the floor to the representative of Syria.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): I would like to provide the Security Council with some information concerning the Astana process. The Astana process — during which, as Council

members know, I participated in its deliberations leading to the Astana 4 agreement — is intended to reach an understanding aimed at establishing de-escalation zones within Syria. That understanding was temporary for six months, renewable in the event that the armed groups that participated in reaching the Astana 4 agreement respected the ceasefire and disassociated themselves from terrorist groups. That has not happened in Idlib.

Those armed groups refused to dissociate themselves from terrorist groups. Rather, to be precise, the armed groups did not refuse to dissociate themselves; it was the same sponsors of those armed groups and terrorist groups that refused to do so while the armed groups had agreed to the Astana 4 agreement. Thus, the disassociation did not happen in Idlib. In addition, the terrorists in Idlib launched 400 drones targeting the Russian Hmeimim base in Latakia. They have also bombarded Aleppo city almost daily for more than a year-and-a-half since we adopted the Astana 4 agreement. Therefore, whoever says that Idlib is a de-escalation zone is wrong, being unaware of the situation on the ground. There is no de-escalation zone in Idlib because armed groups have not respected the provisions of the Astana agreement.

This is just an introduction for members of the Council to explain what we mean by the Astana process, its understanding and how we have reached the current situation in Idlib. Of course, the story dates back earlier. As the Council knows, it started at the Vienna conference in November 2015, in which Syria did not participate and to which it was not even invited. At that conference, it was decided that Jordan would prepare lists determining who is and is not a terrorist. Saudi Arabia was asked to decide who represented and did not represent the opposition. So far that has not happened, which explains the current situation. The countries sponsoring terrorism do not want to distinguish between terrorists and armed opposition.

The Astana process tried to find a solution through the establishment of de-escalation zones. Unfortunately, the process has failed in Idlib for the same reason because the sponsors of the armed and terrorist groups failed to respect the decisions made in Vienna Conference in 2014 and the Astana 4 agreement. My British colleague said earlier that there are 50,000 terrorists in Idlib. Mr. De Mistura said that there are very few gunmen in Idlib, but I would say to my dear colleague the British Ambassador that we are talking about 50,000 terrorists. Could she imagine some day seeing 50,000 terrorists in Manchester, wreaking havoc, while we call them the moderate British armed opposition? Is it imaginable that the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs would provide them with humanitarian aid so as to sustain them in Manchester? That would be absurd.

It is truly ironic that many States Members of the Organization are now facing an unprecedented challenge, namely, that the presidency of the Council is simultaneously playing the role of adversary and arbiter. Yesterday, Madam President, you forced the discussion on Nicaragua onto the Security Council's agenda, although the situation in that country does not constitute a threat to international peace and security. Today, you are forcing a discussion on Idlib, which is a dear part of my country. It will be Venezuela's turn tomorrow, followed by that of Iran, according to our understanding of the current month's programme of work.

The bitter hostility directed towards us for decades has never been our choice because we are one of the founding Members of the United Nations. We believe in peace and in sparing humankind the scourge of war. It has become common practice for three Western countries that are permanent members of the Security Council to use their presidency of the Council to rally others against my country and Government. They hold hundreds of meetings, ring alarm bells, level accusations against us and use menacing language whenever the Syrian army and its allies make progress in countering the armed terrorist groups that are the tools used by those countries.

For the thousandth time, we underscore in this Chamber that the Governments of those three Western countries and their tools in the region are the main and direct cause of the suffering of our people inside and outside the country. They fuel the conflict in Syria and do their utmost to perpetuate by investing in the takfiri, Wahhabi and Saudi terrorism that they invented in the 1980s. Their intelligence services devised deceptive names for the terrorists, such as the Caliphate State, the Army of Islam, the Soldiers of Islam, the Al-Nusra Front, the Turkistan Islamic Army and the Nur Al-Din Al-Zenki Movement. All those names have absolutely nothing to do with Syria. They use such groups as a tool of their foreign policy to exact revenge from countries that reject their diktats.

Any action taken by the Syrian Government to expel terrorist organizations from the Syrian province of Idlib — Idlib is not in Somalia — is a legitimate, sovereign right under international law, the Charter of the United Nations, Security Council resolutions on counter-terrorism and the Astana agreements. Such action is ttaken in response to the demands of millions of Syrians, including the people living in Idlib who are besieged by terrorist organizations. Every day, the Government receives thousands of appeals from our people in Idlib, asking us to liberate them from terrorism.

No country or entity has the right to curtail our sovereign right or use the suffering of civilians in Idlib as a pretext for political or media bartering in order to dissuade the Syrian Government from restoring security, stability and normalcy to that Syrian province. Defending terrorist groups operating in Idlib and surrounding areas is a desperate attempt to save such groups and prolong their existence in preparation for recycling them and then sending them as heavily armed "moderate" oppositions to other countries, such as Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan and Nigeria.

The Syrian State is deeply committed to ensuring the safety of its people. That is why we have clearly stated that reconciliation is our priority. We gave armed groups in Idlib plenty of time to lay down their arms, become part of the reconciliation process and disassociate themselves from terrorist organizations not covered in the Astana 4 agreement. In that regard, those who facilitated the entry of foreign terrorist fighters into my country — the United Nations and the Secretariat refer to them as non-State actors, as opposed to terrorists; the French Ambassador uses the term "jihadists", not "terrorists" — in particular the Turkish Government, still have a chance to remove them from Idlib province, just as they did with elements of the White Helmets who were sent to Idlib, with the cooperation of Israel and Jordan, in order to commit further terrorist crimes with chemical weapons.

If armed terrorist groups refuse to lay down their weapons and leave Syria, the Syrian Government is prepared to shoulder its humanitarian responsibilities and take all the necessary measures to protect civilians; ensure them safe corridors for leaving Idlib; and provide them with shelter, food and medical care, just as in other, similar situations. The aim is to liberate the province of Idlib from the Al-Nusra Front, which is a designated terrorist organization, alongwith other affiliated terrorist groups not covered by the Astana agreements. The Syrian Government has also called upon all international organizations operating in Syria to prepare to meet urgent humanitarian needs.

Speaking of the Al-Nusra Front, I note that the United States, Britain, France and Ukraine continued for one full year in this Council to refuse our call to add Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham — which means the Al-Nusra Front, which means Al-Qaida, which means the criminals who attacked New York — to the Council's terrorist list. However, a month ago we suddenly heard that Washington, D.C., had approved the designation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham as a terrorist group affiliated with the Al-Nusra Front, which means Al-Qaida.

The Syrian Arab Republic is committed to countering and uproot terrorisming and to liberate all Syrian territories from terrorism and foreign occupation in all its forms and manifestations. Support for Syria today is the litmus test of good intentions, compliance with international law and the Charter and of credibility in the war against terrorism. We have provided information to the Council on the intention of terrorist organizations and the White Helmets to use chemical substances in order to blame the Syrian Government and pave the way for yet another tripartite act of aggression. We call on those three countries with influence on terrorist organizations to prevent them from using weapons or chemical substances as a pretext to allow interference and direct aggression by their sponsors against my country.

I would like to inform the Council of the good news that investing in terrorism in Syria has failed. Liberating Idlib from the Al-Nusra Front and other terrorist organizations would be the last nail in their coffin. It would crush the hopes of those who invested billions of dollars in terrorism and whose cries have echoed in the halls of the Organization, just as they did when the Syrian army liberated the eastern districts of Aleppo, eastern Ghouta, Dar'a, Quneitra and their rural areas.

In conclusion, I would like to respond to my colleague, the Deputy Foreign Minister of Kuwait. I remind him that Waleed Al-Tabtabaie, a member of the Kuwaiti National Assembly, organized a campaign to send terrorists to Syria in 2012. The campaign was called "Go fight for jihad in Syria". I am speaking here about a member of the Kuwaiti Parliament, supported of course by terrorist takfiris and salafis who are also

members of Parliament in Kuwait. Another Kuwaiti, Shafi Al-Ajmi, who was added to the list of terrorists at our request, although other members had refused to do so for several years, claims that he is a religious leader. He sent thousands of terrorists and billions of dollars to support terrorism in my country. In 2012, *The New York Times* published a long article on a member of the Kuwaiti army, one Sergeant Al-Mutairi, alleging that he had sent terrorists and $500 million to sponsor terrorism in my country. That is what we received from our brothers in Kuwait. Kuwait calls us brothers but I do not know what kind of brothers these men are. Cain and Abel were not like that. When we stood by Kuwait's side, we did not send terrorists to Kuwait. We sent military forces to protect Kuwait.

The meeting rose at noon.